



Afghanistan's Environmental Recovery

A post-conflict plan for people and
their natural resources

Afghanistan: Rebuilding a war-torn land

In the wake of devastating drought and nearly a quarter of a century of conflict, the Afghan people are working with determination to break a pattern of poverty and to rebuild their war-torn land. Decades of civil strife shattered 60% of the country's infrastructure, created widespread food insecurity and degraded the natural resource base on which most Afghans are dependent to satisfy their basic subsistence needs.

As Afghanistan moves forward, the Government has placed security, good governance, and self-sustainability at the top of its reconstruction agenda. To achieve these goals, investment in rebuilding human capital and institutions, particularly those necessary for effective natural resource management and recovery, is an essential part of Afghanistan's vision towards securing its future.

Environmental Recovery and Responsibility

Following the convening of Afghanistan's *Loya Jirga*¹ in 2002, a mandate for environmental management was included in the new transitional governmental structure. For the first time in the history of the country, a ministerial-level body was established to support conservation of the environment and sustainable development of Afghanistan's natural resources. It has since evolved into the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA). One of the first tasks was to identify the most pressing environmental needs. In cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), NEPA² embarked on a post-conflict environmental assessment during late 2002.



Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment

Together with Afghan authorities, local communities and international and national experts, UNEP and NEPA carried out a series of assessment missions in 35 rural locations and 38 urban sites. They conducted hundreds of interviews and collected 60 field samples to test air, soil and water contamination. This work culminated in 2003 with the publication of UNEP's Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment of Afghanistan.

The report found that the long-term consequences of nearly 25 years of war and overexploitation of Afghanistan's once rich natural resources created grave environmental threats. These included surface and groundwater scarcity and contamination, massive and ongoing deforestation, desertification of important wetlands, soil erosion, air pollution, and depleted wildlife populations. In addition, the prolonged lack of water and the rapid disappearance of half of the country's forest and woodland cover turned thousands of people into environmental refugees. This has led to increased population pressure on over-burdened urban areas and could generate new small-scale conflicts over access to scarce resources. National capacity to address these problems is severely limited as a result of the collapse of local and national forms of governance and resource management.

¹ Loosely translated as Grand Council, a traditional Afghan decision making forum

² Formerly called the Department of Environment of the Ministry of Irrigation, Water Resources and Environment

Capacity Building for Environmental Management

Based on the findings from the environmental assessment report, NEPA requested immediate follow-up assistance from UNEP in terms of capacity building for environmental management. A multi-year programme was jointly developed between UNEP and NEPA, and funding was provided by the European Commission (EC), the Government of Finland and the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

The purpose of the *Capacity and Institution Building Programme for Environmental Management in Afghanistan* is to develop a stand-alone and self-sufficient environmental administration with the required technical capacity to implement newly developed environmental law and policy. To achieve this goal, UNEP experts train and mentor counterpart staff from NEPA, provide technical assistance and advice on an as-needed basis, as well as supply basic office and field equipment. NEPA takes the lead role for all major decisions to ensure Afghan ownership is retained and reinforced at all times. The programme is being implemented by UNEP from October 2003 to December 2006 and consists of five main pillars:

Pillar 1: Environmental institutions and coordination

Sustainable management of environmental resources can only happen when national and local-level institutions have clear mandates, effective and coordinated structures, technically skilled staff and sufficient financial

resources. To achieve these goals, UNEP provides technical support to NEPA for the on-going reform and re-organization process of the Civil Service Reform Commission. This includes proposals on administrative re-structuring, staffing levels and job descriptions, and the creation of eight regional hubs with provincial desks. UNEP also helps to coordinate environmental programmes between the various stakeholders in Afghanistan, as well as to mainstream environmental issues within UN country team plans and programmes.

Pillar 2: Environmental law and policy

Development of environmental policy and establishing a realistic environmental legal framework are goals pursued alongside the establishment of environmental institutions. In this regard, UNEP provides environmental legal support to NEPA during the drafting and review of key laws. The main focus is to support the development of the Environmental Act while ensuring Afghan ownership and sufficient consultation between relevant Ministries and stakeholders. In addition, UNEP helps to ensure Afghanistan fulfills its legal obligations under various multi-lateral environmental agreements. UNEP also provides technical support in the evaluation of best practice and in the development of policy options for various environmental issues, in particular pollution management and enforcement.

Pillar 3: Environmental impact assessment

Afghanistan is entering the phase of large-scale multi-million dollar investments in development programmes and infrastructure. Some of these programmes may produce significant environmental impacts, thereby undermining sustainable





development and human livelihoods. A functional system of environmental screening and impact assessment of all investment decisions is essential to ensure that decisions are made with a full understanding of impacts and options. UNEP gives technical support to NEPA in the development of environmental impact assessment guidelines, databases, policies and processes. The programme also works to train NEPA counterpart staff on environmental impact assessment, and to implement relevant policies and practices in the field.

Pillar 4: Environmental information and education

Effective environmental decision making depends on the availability of timely and high-quality environmental information. One of the consequences of the Afghan conflict was widespread damage to and loss of sources of environmental information including maps, records, reference materials and expertise. In order for NEPA to develop capacity for environmental management, the UNEP programme is working to provide a basic environmental information centre in Kabul. The centre will collect, organize and distribute environmental information on current environmental conditions and on-going assistance programmes. UNEP will also develop pilot training activities with Kabul University, Kabul Polytechnic, the Ministry of Higher Education and UNESCO to train a new generation of national environmental experts.

Pillar 5: Community-based natural resources management

Prior to the outbreak of conflict, Afghanistan had a strong tradition of provincial and local level natural resources management. With the onset of war, many local governing structures collapsed, allowing uncontrolled extraction of natural resources. NEPA has identified the urgent need to re-establish community-based natural resources management and rehabilitation practices. To achieve this goal, UNEP provides advice in the identification and implementation of pilot projects to test various community-based natural resources management methods across the country and identify best practice. UNEP is also contributing technical expertise to the Green Afghanistan Initiative (GAIN). GAIN aims to coordinate activities, mobilize funds and provide technical expertise for UN, NGO and governmental projects aimed at “Greening Afghanistan”.



“Afghan ownership is the key – where ideas are externally imposed they fail to take root and cannot be implemented... Community action, involvement, and therefore ownership will be key to the security and sustainability of reconstruction efforts.”

Lessons Learned
Securing Afghanistan's Future – 2004

Future needs

Addressing the environmental problems in Afghanistan is an immense challenge that will take decades to be achieved by the Government of Afghanistan and the National Environmental Protection Agency. Sustained financial assistance and technical support will be needed during the entire process from the international community.

UNEP is contributing to environmental recovery in Afghanistan in an adaptive and incremental manner. UNEP's work up to December 2006 is aimed at establishing a solid information, institutional and human resource base within NEPA from which environmental management can be further developed in 2007 and beyond.

Future needs in Afghanistan include the implementation of the Environmental Act as well as secondary regulations, the decentralization of the environmental administration including developing management capacity in the provinces, additional work on inter-ministerial environmental capacity building, the development of curricula for environmental education, and the expansion of community-based natural resources management and restoration projects.

In order to help the Government succeed in its visionary goal of securing Afghanistan's environmental future, UNEP and NEPA are collaborating with a number of partners and aid agencies including the Ministries of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food, Water and Energy, Public Health, Urban Development and Housing, Rural Rehabilitation and Development, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNESCO, HABITAT, UNDP, FAO and WFP in terms of sharing information and providing technical advice.

Using this collaborative approach, progress is being made in addressing Afghanistan's numerous environmental problems and rebuilding the infrastructure necessary to ensure what Afghans themselves wish for, as reflected in their new constitution: “a prosperous life and sound environment for all those residing in this land”.



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